

Rell train and bus fare hikes draw fire

Rell seeks to balance budget with more bus, train revenue

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Posted: 06/01/2009 08:02:12 PM EDT

Updated: 06/02/2009 07:13:09 AM EDT

Lawmakers as well as rail and bus advocates Monday urged Gov. M. Jodi Rell to drop her proposal to hike CTTransit bus fares by 40 percent and Metro-North Railroad fares by 10 percent to balance the state budget.

The increases are economically unfair and damaging to transit, opponents said.

"Keeping mass transit affordable is how you encourage people to stay off the highways," said Jim Cameron, chairman of the Connecticut Rail Commuter Council.

Members of Transit for Connecticut, a coalition of transportation advocacy groups and planners, said a bus fare hike from \$1.25 to \$1.75 would hurt lower-income workers and undermine the state's goal of encouraging use of mass transit.

The group sent Rell a letter Monday.

State Sen. Robert Duff, D-Norwalk, opposes the increases.

"The bus increases affect the working poor who already struggle day to day, but this also affects people who do the right thing by taking the train to work and then the bus to go to their place of

business," Duff said. "It could push people back onto the highway again."

Rell proposed the hikes last week as part of a revised budget that included another \$1.3 billion in spending cuts to close an \$8 billion gap over the next two years.

The fare increases are needed to cover Metro-North Railroad and CTTransit deficits and ensure the Special Transportation Fund remains balanced, said Jeffrey Beckham, spokesman for the state Office of Policy and Management. The fund, which began this year with a \$78 million balance, is expected to go into deficit in 2011 if nothing changes, according to the state.

"We need to find a way to defray the costs of those services a little more," Beckham said.

Last year, Metro-North Railroad brought in \$240 million in fares, compared with \$328 million in operating expenses, an \$87 million deficit that is 65 percent covered by the state, according to the Department of Transportation.

Last year, CTTransit collected \$40 million, compared with \$160 million in expenses, according to the DOT.

Opponents said Rell touted her budget for avoiding tax increases, but they said the fare hikes would be a tax on commuters.

"Close to 10 percent of residents in Connecticut don't have cars," said Ryan Lynch of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign. "It truly is a tax increase on transit riders."

Joseph McGee, vice president for public policy for the Business Council of Fairfield County, a member of Transit for Connecticut, said the bus fare hikes

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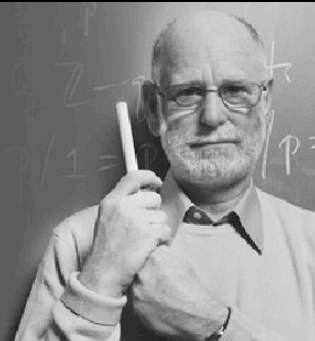
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The ADVOCATE

would hurt older residents who earn lower wages and travel by bus to retail jobs.

"Forty percent is just such a big jump. It seems out of whack," McGee said. "It is excessive and will discourage ridership, and, moreover, fall disproportionately on working people."

Louis Schulman, director of the Norwalk Transit District, opposes the bus fare increase. Adding a penny to the state gas tax would raise the same revenue, he said.

"The lack of public transportation is the most commonly cited barrier to employment among lower-income workers, and we're also penalizing people who are doing the right thing environmentally," Schulman said.

Judd Everhart, a spokesman for the DOT, said the agency tried to prevent rail or bus fare increases.

"Connecticut DOT and the governor have done everything possible to minimize the impact of the current budget crisis on commuters, and a fare increase is an absolute last resort," Everhart said.

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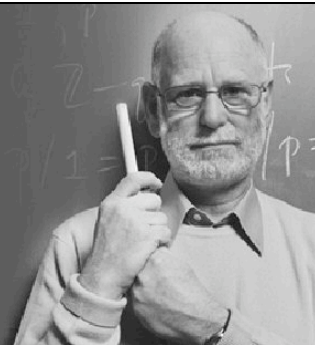
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